

CHAPTER I:

PUBLIC HEALTH'S SCOPE OF PRACTICE: WHAT DO WE DO?

MISSION STATEMENT:

To Achieve and Sustain Healthy People and Healthy Communities Throughout King County by Providing Public Health Services Which Promote Health and Prevent Disease.

In, 1889, the Washington State Constitution established the State Board of Health, which legally identified public health as a government responsibility. Since then, state law has further defined the role, responsibility, and structure of public health (see RCW/WAC in Appendix A).

Local boards of health, created by statute, are the governing boards of local health departments. They are responsible for establishing the policy framework for the agency and have supervision over all matters pertaining to the preservation of the life and health of the people within its jurisdiction.

Local public health departments develop and implement programs in response to: 1) laws passed by the legislature (RCW); 2) rules promulgated by the State Board of Health (WAC); 3) needs identified and funded by the U.S. Congress and federal agencies; 4) needs identified locally; and, 5) other programs funded from a variety of sources for specific health problems in local communities.

In addition, the County's Health Officer has statutory powers to provide necessary health services needed in the event of an emergency.

The public health system is not only mandated by statute, but is also wanted by constituents. While many people do not know about the functions of a public health agency, when informed, they are highly supportive of public health programs and activities and view them as essential. Basically, people want to know that their water and food are safe, that disease outbreaks will be contained quickly, that emergency medical services (Medic One) will be available when needed, and so on. (Harris Poll, 1997).

A strong Public Health system is essential to assure the health of the public.

In contrast to medical care which helps one individual at a time, the public health system helps entire communities. This "population-based" approach reaches large groups of people by proactively preventing health problems and by promoting health and wellness. This public health approach is a major contributor to most of the 30 year gain in average life expectancy the United States

achieved during this century (Center for Disease Control, 1993).

This system's role is to protect communities from harmful conditions and to promote healthy behaviors and actions. Clearly, a strong public health system is essential in order to assure the health of the public, and the local public health department is a key part of the overall public health system which includes local, state, and federal agencies as well as their private partners.

To carry out this responsibility, Public Health - Seattle & King County's scope of work is necessarily broad; and during the next five years, Public Health will need to move beyond the status quo of service provision

to improve the health status of all King County residents. Funding will need to be obtained to address several priority issues including the increasing rates of chronic disease as the population ages, controlling infectious disease, assuring health care for low-income people, and promoting health behaviors and actions that establish and sustain a lifetime of excellent health and wellness for the residents of King County.

"Prevention" is a central theme in most public health interventions and is a cost-effective strategy, not only for the public health system, but the entire health system. Public Health utilizes the Determinants of Health Model to develop and implement policies and programs aimed at assuring the public's health. This model identifies multiple factors that determine health, healthy behaviors, and healthy actions. Public Health seeks to address these factors in order to prevent illness, injury, and premature death as well as to promote excellent health and wellness. More information on the Determinants of Health Model may be found in Chapter 4 and Appendix C.

Prevention strategies can be viewed as primary, secondary, or tertiary. Primary prevention promotes health by eliminating the causes of illness or injury. Examples of primary prevention activities include programs that prevent young persons from starting to smoke, that promote exercise and healthy eating, and that provide immunization against infectious diseases.

Secondary prevention activities resolve health problems early, before serious consequences

result. Examples of these activities include detecting and treating persons with early tuberculosis before it causes lung disease, getting smokers to quit before they get emphysema, and treating people with

high blood pressure to prevent strokes and heart disease.

Tertiary prevention involves amelioration of serious consequences of disease, such as treating persons who have had heart attacks, cancer, or advanced tuberculosis to prevent further progression of disease. Tertiary prevention is largely the responsibility of the larger health care system, but, even with tertiary prevention, public health has an important role, particularly in assuring that everyone has access to advanced health care.

Primary prevention activities are the ideal and are the most cost-effective for public health and the larger health system, because they address the problem before it starts and before expensive treatment is needed. Secondary prevention also can be a cost-effective strategy for some health problems and is often very closely linked to primary prevention. For example, treating persons with early tuberculosis (secondary prevention) protects other persons in the community from getting infected (primary prevention).

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Another key public health activity involves assessment and surveillance of the community's health status. The purpose of assessment is to understand the unique health status of the community through monitoring risk factors, and health outcomes of the community and other determinants of health in order to identify goals and set priorities. Surveillance is somewhat like detective work in which public health staff monitor the community's health status in order to identify issues that require public health action.

In addition, Public Health is charged with protecting the public from health threats and assuring that low-income, under-insured, uninsured, and/or high risk people receive needed health care services. Protecting the public from health threats involves a variety of activities including responding to disease outbreaks, providing immunizations, and requiring sanitation measures in restaurants. It also involves public health education efforts that inform and teach people about reducing their risks of illness, injury, and premature death.

Public Health - Seattle & King County's role in assuring health services for high risk, low income, and under- or uninsured people is very important. This function involves coordination and partnering with other agencies providing Safety Net services. At some sites, Public Health provides direct medical and dental services for people needing them. At other sites, Public Health provides only the "wrap-around" services, for example, interpretation, public health nursing, or family planning.

In 1993, the Washington State Legislature created the Public Health Improvement Plan (PHIP), which set direction and provided resources to improve the state's public health system. The PHIP focuses on the core functions of public health (assessment, policy development, and assurance) with the goal of assuring that public health's basic mission "healthy people and healthy communities" is met across Washington State. At press time, Washington State is drafting standards for public health practice which will further shape public health practice in King County and across Washington state.

In addition, all of the United States (including Washington) use a standard set of "Ten Essential Public Health Services" as a foundation for public health practice. These Ten Essential Services specify the key activities necessary for all public health systems. See Table I on the next page for a stratification of each of the Ten Essential Services by key public health core functions.

Public Health – Seattle & King County is also guided by its own Guiding Principles (Appendix B). These principles (developed in early 1999) outline strategies for improved public health practice over the next five years, and inherently complement the PHIP's core functions as well as the Ten Essential Services.

All together, these standards and strategies propel Public Health – Seattle & King County and the residents of King County toward realization of the vision, "healthy people and healthy communities."

Table I
Public Health Core Functions and Ten Essential Services

Assessment	
<i>Essential Services</i>	<i>Examples</i>
1) Monitoring health status of the community	Assessing infant mortality and birth weight; monitoring rates of asthma hospitalizations; analyzing disease reports
2) Diagnosing and investigating health problems and hazards	Investigating salmonella, E. coli, and pertussis outbreaks; monitoring water quality
3) Informing and educating people health issues	HIV prevention education; Back to Sleep SIDS prevention campaign; CHILD Profile health promotion mailings; “5-A-Day” nutrition education program
Policy Development	
<i>Essential Services</i>	<i>Examples</i>
4) Mobilizing partnerships to solve community problems	African-American Roundtable; King County Outreach Network; King County Health Action Plan; Dental Safety Net Task Force
5) Supporting policies and plans to achieve health goals	Tobacco control policies for sales to minors; assuring immunizations for children
Assurance	
<i>Essential Services</i>	<i>Examples</i>
6) Enforcing laws and regulations to protect health and safety	Food/restaurant inspection; food handler permitting
7) Linking people to needed personal health services	Primary care for non-English speaking people; Medicaid/BHP application assistance
8) Ensuring a skilled public health workforce	Diversity Management Initiative; personnel training and skill building
9) Evaluating effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of health services	South County Access Project; King County Health Action Plan
10) Researching and applying innovative solutions	Reducing environmental triggers to asthma in children; EMS research; studies tracking Hepatitis C in injection drug users